



Circle of Protection
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A Pastoral Letter about Faith, Finances, and the Federal Budget

February 25, 2013

President Barack Obama
White House

Majority Leader Harry Reid
Minority Leader Mitch McConnell
U.S. Senate

Speaker John Boehner
Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear President Obama, Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Boehner and Minority Leader Pelosi:

Throughout two years of budget negotiations, we and other faith leaders have urged you to maintain a Circle of Protection around effective programs focused on hungry and poor people in our country and around the world. This pastoral letter offers faith-grounded counsel on the current stage of the budget negotiations.

First, we thank you for reducing the deficit while limiting cuts to programs serving poor people. Together, you have reduced deficits by an estimated \$2 trillion, a significant step in getting our fiscal house in order. We are grateful that programs focused on hungry and poor people have not seen large cuts so far. We appreciate that President Obama has kept his promise to the Circle of Protection to protect the poor, and that Republicans and Democrats agreed to shield many core programs benefiting people living in or near poverty from the sequestration cuts. More critical decisions must be made as we consider specific program cuts to reach previously agreed upon funding levels, look for additional ways to reduce the deficit, and avert the looming sequestration; but the moral calculus has not changed. Our long-term fiscal challenges will not be solved by increasing the burden on those who Jesus called the “least of these” (Matthew 25).

Second, we are praying for you. The Bible teaches us to pray for those in authority, and prayer contributes to mutually respectful debate that advances the common good. The focus of our nation's budget negotiations should not be about which politicians win or lose, but about whether our budget decisions reflect our values. We will ask our churches to pray as you continue to work together on the budget.

Third, we plead for a renewed commitment to respectful bi-partisan dialogue and an end to brinksmanship. Moving from one crisis to another has slowed economic recovery and has kept Congress from finding a sound, moral path to fiscal sustainability. Other important issues go unaddressed, all the while increasing cynicism about our political process. Congress' actions should not provoke a serious economic setback or push more people into poverty.

Fourth, we understand that the country's fiscal health will require further cost savings and additional revenue. To reduce the deficit, we need revenue and savings that don't increase poverty. Increased health care costs are major drivers of the nation's long-term fiscal challenge, and adjustments will be needed over time. Medicare can be reformed in ways that do not harm those who depend on the health care coverage it provides, especially seniors with modest means. Any savings in Medicaid should avoid changes harming low-income beneficiaries either directly — by cutting benefits or eligibility — or indirectly by shifting costs to states.

Fifth, we strongly affirm the government's responsibility concerning poor people. The Bible teaches that civil authority comes from God, and God calls for protection of poor and vulnerable people. Government is imperfect, and there are legitimate differences over how the government should carry out its responsibilities. These should be debated. Assuring government's obligation to advance the common good, ensure fairness, and defend the most vulnerable is good religion and good politics.

Sixth, it is time to frame the budget debate in terms of moral choices that are understandable to the American people. Important choices must be made: we must weigh the benefits of tax credits for low-income people and tax breaks for high-income people; of nutrition assistance to low-income families and subsidies to agricultural businesses. Within the category of "defense," there is a difference between legitimate national security and unnecessary spending. Congress can and must develop a balanced and thoughtful path forward that protects the most vulnerable and preserves economic opportunity.

Finally, we ask both parties to work together toward ending hunger and poverty. The Circle of Protection continues to be committed to protecting vital programs for people in or near poverty in our country and around the world, but that is not enough. Help us reduce hunger and poverty by expanding opportunity and justice, promoting economic growth and good paying jobs, stabilizing family life, and protecting the well-being of children. We celebrate the progress the world is making against hunger, poverty, and disease, and we are encouraged by the possibility of ending extreme hunger and poverty globally. Dramatic progress against hunger and poverty in

our richly blessed country is also possible. Please, protect the poor and help create the opportunities that make them poor no more.

Respectfully,

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